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HOUSE AS A MONUMENT
OR THE SUBLIMATION
OF RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

DOM JAK MONUMENT
CZYLI O UWZNIÓŚLENIU
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Abstract

Among the diversity of contemporary architectural motivations, one discovers the ideas of stylistic message that define a nontraditional way of defining the architecture of houses and residential complexes. This refers to the attempts at the monumentalisation of form – its sublimation and attribution of these semantic features, which were considered rejected by the dogma of modernity.

Keywords: house, monumentalisation

Streszczenie

Pośród różnorodności współczesnych motywacji architektonicznych odkrywamy te pomysły przekazu stylistycznego, które określają pewien nietradycyjny sposób definiowania architektury domów i zespołów mieszkaniowych. Chodzi o próby monumentalizacji formy – jej uwznioślenia i nadawania tych cech znaczeniowych, które uznano za odrzucone przez dogmaty nowoczesności.

Słowa kluczowe: dom, monumentalizacja

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1. *Res privata*. In the architectural tradition, a lack of monumental significance of residential architecture had always been defined by the sense of a distinction between *res publica* and *res privata* buildings. The term of monumentalism had been strictly assigned to certain types of public buildings enjoying prestige and appropriate rank in the transmission of social values: theatres, temples, stations, institutions, etc. All private architecture – including residential, commercial and industrial one – had been ranked among things deprived of monumental features. With time, architectural theories enriched the collection of monuments with urban villas, mansions, palaces and castles, which, due to the genuine willingness of their (most often wealthy) owners seeking pleasure and satisfaction in life, were “marked” with the merit of a monument through context, scale, symmetry, proportions or measure. Thus, mansions started to establish a fragment of the world of forms, which contained similar symbolism and nature of the space that was previously found in public facilities. Owing to this referentiality, one can interpret Andrea Palladio’s work *Villa Rotonda* in Vicenza (1582), Filippo Brunelleschi’s Florentine *Pallazzo Pitti* (1464) and Giulio Romano’s Mannerist work *Pallazzo del Tè* in Mantua (1534) in a similar way.



In the nineteenth century, a decline of the architecture drawing from the tradition of neo-classical sources determined another sense of the monumental form’s significance. Urban housing tenements, along with the evolution of their corner forms in the shape and likeness of public buildings, provided a pretext to develop the concept of old forms in a new guise.

The House of the Postal Savings Bank’s Employees (1923–27) at 5 Zyblikiewicz Street in Cracow designed by Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz is non-exceptional though expressive in its sublimation of the “Petersburgian school”. Today, the residential complex serving as a complement to the adjacent quarter of the bank seems not so much a response to the new trend of historicising Modernism, but rather an attempt at the embodiment of academic Classicism derived from the best practices of urban planning in imperial Russia. The “skyscraper” in Katowice (1934) is situated in a different (already purely modernist) context – the fourteen-storey residential corner designed by Tadeusz Kozłowski and Henryk Griffel at the junction of Żwirko-Wigura Street and Skłodowska-Curie Street stands out with its height and elegance of Cubist expression among the gatherings of residential corner forms. The high-rise in Katowice is simply also a residential tower growing above the nearby buildings and manifesting its distinctness deprived of any decoration.

The interwar Modernism finally transferred the new principle to residential architecture. In accordance with the nineteenth-century development, residential buildings took the form and scale previously reserved for palaces, banks, cinemas, theatres and shopping malls. That fact helped to redefine the spatial shape of a housing development, which became an equivalent structure within the city plan – and even more so – monumentality of residential complexes in totalitarian countries introduced a paramount importance of this type of architecture so as to enhance political ideology, which was to express the strength and power of the state.

The proper classical monumental architecture appropriate in its scale was adopted as an emanation of the idea of creating the form, which was “national in form and socialist in content”. Housing architecture, created in Palladian orders, placed on high ground floors, complemented by decorative attics, colonnades, arches and wide cornices provided a pretext

for the sublimation and creation of the foundation of natural conditions in which the working class could live, study and rest. The monumentalism of architecture was additionally underpinned with symmetry of squares and communication arteries – with their hieratic function adapted for the formal dogma. In addition to their main didactic feature permeated with the pathos of forms, the quarter development around the Central Square in Nowa Huta (1949–51) designed by Tadeusz Ptaszycycki and Józef Sigalin, Stanisław Jankowski's Marshal's Residential District in Warsaw (1950–52), Hermann Henselmann's Straussberger Platz in Berlin (1953) or the “neo-gothic” Kotelnicheskaya Embankment Building (1947–52) designed by Dmitry Chechulin in the fashion of The Palace of the Soviets became a prime example of the period in architecture and urban planning, which preferred peripheral buildings with clearly separated streets and urban units creating a closed interior.

2. Monoliths. Although it is believed that abstract Modernism rejected the idea of a monument due to its academic references, it did not manage to avoid these formations whose scale and location within the landscape imposed (at the beginning rather vague) comparisons to the works characterised by the idea of – a residential building – the residential structure perfect in form and function. “A house like the city” or “city skyscraper” were synonyms of the same way of thinking about the living space in which self-sufficiency of a unit created a particular precedent, which saw architecture enter the world of “giant figures”.

The designs of the futuristic cities, which strongly affected artists' imagination – going beyond the reality of everyday life with their intransigence, scale and panache – were not without significance for progressive housing solutions. Ludwig Hilberseimer's vedutas *Vertical City* (1924) were equally monumental to *Cittá Nuova* (1914) consisting in monumental designs sketched by Antonio Sant'Ellia. The transatlantic liner *Aquitaine* indicated by Le Corbusier as a model machine for collective living was wonderful, clever and correct, but also overscaled in its message. For long years to come, the homogeneously abstract city of “mechanistic” buildings became the leaven for creating the unprecedented idea of human existence, e.g. *Planu Voisin*¹.

Another consequence of Le Corbusier's total thinking in the later *Cité Radieuse* was the transformation that took place in the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century – the “transparent” space of Bauhausian Modernism gave way to the aesthetics of the “raw” space of late Modernism. The linkage between such aesthetics and the sphere of social needs was heralded by the manifesto entitled *Nine Points of Monumentality* announced in 1943 by José Luis Sert, Fernand Leger and Sigfried Giedion, which specified the need to build monuments in line with the humanistic identity of democratic societies in the post-war period. This was also foreshadowed by the concept of a work perceived as a finite whole in the sense of the

¹ Karel Teige's attack on Le Corbusier's design of *Mundaneum* in 1929 is a well-known case. Teige attacked both the very idea of the contest, which he considered to be harmful, and the Corbusieran design that he perceived as a betrayal of the basic principles of modernist architecture – purposefulness. Teige wrote: “Monumental and votive architecture, dedicated to whatever memorial of revolution and liberation; all present-day triumphal arches, festive halls, tombs, palaces and castles result in monstrosities. Examples of concrete and utilitarian architecture, as well as omens of a new metaphysical, monumental architecture both show clearly that, at the present time, architecture will fail in so far as it is not dictated by the actual needs of social and economic life.” K. Teige, *Mundaneum* (1929), trans. L.E. Holovsky and L. Dolezel, [in:] “Oppositions Reader”, New York 1998, p. 595.



Ill. 1. Katowicki drapacz chmur, T. Kozłowski, H. Griffel, 1934; [za:] <https://wikipedia.org>

transformation of architectural stylistics – from the work's elements creating an architectural uniformity to the visible structure of its functional elements. The accompanying *béton brut* stylistics revealed “the whole truth” about the monolithic architecture of the building – transparency of its construction and the ensuing readable physical and functional structure, allowing one to read logical content of architecture. Spontaneity and randomness of brutalist stylistics, which showed innate features of creating a building without any references to some undefined abstraction, constituted a return to naturalism in architecture in a certain sense.

The stylistics of the raw form began to be responsible for the tone and essence of the meaning of monolithism – a structural principle in which an idea is created in a uniform, visible material. Thus, the creators started to obtain the effect of a certain structural material aesthetic dominance, the essence of architecture consisting in the “outgrowth” of form over its internal organisation. That material “supremacy” incorporated the way of defining architecture as an integral spatial thing in which the articulation of a structural principle signifies the willingness to continue architecture as the art having its source in the roots of structural and building nature. The monumental units – first the Marseilleian one and the subsequent ones built in: Nantes (1955), Berlin (1957), Firminy (1965) and Briey (1963) became an idealised “discovery” of the advantages of the structure dominating over the urban landscape concealed for decades. Le Corbusier's gigantic residential buildings (believed to be the paradigm of all subsequent blocks) were the first example in which the contemporaries recognised the features of the new mature movement – brutalism.

Charles Jencks's words confirmed the material impression that the Marseilleian building had on the audience: “The sheer physical presence of this ship-like monolith is overwhelming. Its power and weight are crushing. Its sculptural boldness and aggressive outline are so emphatic that, although it is now lower than the surrounding blocks, it still leaves an imprint on the whole landscape. This poignancy comparable to that, which Acropolis emanates with was intended by Le Corbusier”². The architect was followed by his disciples: Oscar Niemeyer with the implementation of the *Copan Building* (1953–66, 31 floors and 115 meters high) in São Paulo and the residential building in Belo Horizonte (1954–55); Ernő Goldfinger with *Balfron Tower* and *Trellick Tower* (1972, 31 floors and 98 metres high) dominating over London suburbs. Owing to the multi-family implementations: *Sky Building No.3* and *Sky Building No.5* (1971) in Tokyo Yoji Watanabe's poetic brutalism was activated in Japan. Another reference to brutalism was the implementation of *Keble College* dormitories in Oxford (1972–1980) and the Technology Centre in Chichester (1967) designed by Ahrends, Burton and Koralek Architects or Ernesto Rogers' *Torre Velasca* (1954) in Milan. In all of the above cases – concrete – the material of the buildings' structures is responsible for the presentation of an architectural metaphor, which became a tool for strengthening the reception of the monumental theme and provided buildings with an appropriate aesthetic dimension through the creation of formal analogies and comparisons³.

Fig. 2. Unité d'Habitation in Berlin, Le Corbusier, 1957; photo. MCh

² Ch. Jencks, *Le Corbusier – tragizm współczesnej architektury*, Warszawa 1982, p. 151.

³ Leon Krier is of different opinion about the apparent monumentality of blocks, tower blocks and other creations of functionalism. He writes: “The fake »monumentality« of the utilitarian skyscraper reveals itself in the meanness of its ceiling heights and room sizes”. *Monumentalność prawdziwa i fałszywa* [in:] L. Krier, *Architektrua. Wybór i przeznaczenie*, Warszawa 2001, p. 35.



III. 2. Jednostka Berlińska, Le Corbusier, 1957, foto M. Charciarek

4. Metaphors. Emerging in the seventies, Postmodernism gave architecture the significance of a monument back by means of the metaphor based on maintaining the tradition of naming architectural things. The flagship metaphor of Modernism – a *house* treated as a *machine for living in* – had faded out along with the conviction that a house constituted the foundation of the new architectural poetics – the convention denoting such “symbolic” secondary functions as a metope, pediment, column or tympanum. Umberto Eco turned it even into a taxonomy of the species of architecture, giving examples of a villa, castle, church, palace or station – the types, which had developed their own tradition and their own manner of depiction.

The postmodern convention of naming things “by name” is subject to the principle of a more or less expressive process of poeticising forms. Robert Stern was of the same opinion about the significant role of the poetic processing of conventional meanings: “Architecture is less an issue of innovation than an act of interpretation; to be an architect is to possess an individual voice speaking a generally understood language of form. To be really articulate as an architect is to raise that voice to heights of lyricism, to make each element, each word resonate with meaning”⁴.

That is precisely the same way Robert Krier and Oswald Mathias Ungers define their metaphorical figures – the objects named as a “tower”, “gable”, “dome” or simply a “house”. Postmodern architects either want to make a pretence of continuing the tradition – or recognise that the architecture of traditional meanings does not need continuation at all – therefore, their works constitute a part of the continuity of the long professed forms. Those creators, who realised metaphorical possibilities of presenting the extensive game with history, try to fulfil their visions based on the metaphors illustrating various types and elements belonging to the past. According to Leon Krier, the basic aesthetic and ethical principles of Postmodernism consist in the universally acknowledged values, regardless of time and place, climate and civilisation.

Ricardo Bofill finds a point of reference to building metaphors from the canon of historical forms in the tradition of French Classicism. The creator’s implementations in peripheral towns outside Paris show his fondness for great historical orders, overscaled forms and reveal his genuine fascination with the idea of the return to the traditional urban space concept. The Spanish architect is a follower of the postmodern thought defining the city as a space associated with tradition and context organised by the forced stylistics emphasised with the importance of monumental buildings. The creator realises the “urbanity” of architecture by means of crystallisation of space with arbitrary classicising monumentalism – adapted both for residential purposes and the function of public utility. He demonstrates that mass production does not necessarily have to end with industrial aesthetics dominant in the twentieth century. The implementations of *New Towns* outside Paris were also to become an opportunity for a particular idea to designate the convention of a traditional model of the *civitas* structure and to rehabilitate postmodern public space. The renewed significance of such elements as “squares”, “streets”, “courtyards” or “gates” was to obtain a metaphorical status of a superior and clear structure organising space and life of local community, defining new urban values. Analogous to *Karl-Marx-Hof* (1930) designed by Karl Ehne in Vienna fifty years earlier, Bofill’s residential complexes *Les Arcades du Lac*

⁴ Ch. Norberg-Schulz, *The Two Faces of Post-Modernism*, “Architectural Design” 1988, No. 7–8, p. 14.

in St-Quentin-en-Yvelines and *Les Espaces d'Abraxas* in Marne-la-Valée – are the basis for determining identity by way of an afterimage of the freely understood tradition of “palace shapes”. In both buildings, the said stylistics is subject to the principle of creating a new quality of multifamily development involving the introduction of specific, symbolic formal meanings adapted to modern technology in order to convert the cheap function of a block into that of a palace. Evident historical reminiscences in *Les Arcades du Lac* (1974–1981) are determined by the French Baroque principles of urban planning composition. The reclassification of architecture, which Boffill proposes to residents is conducted with the introduction of large-scale components subordinated to the long, horizontal block situated on the shore of a man-made lake – the aquatic square. The building interrupted by the rhythm of gates-arcades is open to a distant, undefined horizon inviting architecture into the game of the natural park assumption. The widely applied ornamentation accompanied by the processed historical detail repeated cyclically in subsequent residential sections underpins the whole of metaphorical aims. The interiors of the columns in Boffill’s architecture may hide a stairwell, bathroom or kitchen shaft.

An interesting commentary, which describes the semantic transformations that took place in postmodern architecture, is Dariusz Kozłowski’s design *Transpodgórze* (1989), being an idea for the reorganisation of one of the housing estates at Śliska Street in the centre of Cracow’s Podgórze district. *Transpodgórze* is a residential block, but the block of flats that possesses the characteristics of a monumental liner – “guide” – a metaphorical ship being able to organise and suggest new significance of the place at the modernist estate. The body of the building is higher than its neighbourhood, it has eight floors and its triple structure (base-superstructure-chimneys) is supposed to be a premeditated reference to the traditional understanding of a “house-block” in the city at the time of the stylistic turning point – upon returning to the established historical typology of residential development.

In their syntax and return of particular elements’ significance, Aldo Rossi’s buildings analogically show unreserved longing for monumentalism. By using the term *ogetti* with reference to his buildings, the architect includes not only the connotation of the buildings specially designed for a given space and context, but also the ones, which establish the value revealing “analogue” fascinations. For Rossi, a house in the city is not only a thing of “monumental” features like a “theatre”, “temple”, “school”, “tower”, “wall” or “gate”, but also a characteristic way to extol residential corners. The corner tenement at Kochstrasse in Berlin (block 10, IBA 1987–1989) is defined by the power of a white column of a raw form, while the Milan quarter *Via Zoagli* (1985–1991), identical to Berlin’s implementation, not only determines the expression of the place, but also informs the audience about an inalienable role of postmodern architecture – rejection of an experiment in favour of discovering and arranging forgotten things. *Il Palazzo* hotel in Fukuoka (1987) is a composition referring to the monumental language of the classical portico – the main façade facing the square is a reduced brick figure split by steel cornices, “posing” as a classical representation. In addition to his well-known praise for the works of Soviet socialist realism, the model for Rossi’s works is hidden in a magical and surreal world of Giorgio de Chirico’s painting – the space filled with the sense of “exaggerated” figures.

[Idealisation of space]. The architectural geometries of Mario Botta’s houses, regarded as the material foundation of the symbolism expressing perfection and versatility, constitute a monumental experience. It seems that in line with his professed theory, Botta

finds a unique satisfaction in the use of round forms, considering them extremely vulnerable and requiring special treatment. Having infinite symmetry and Platonic reference to the ideal of beauty, cylindrical shapes constitute an unquestionable example of order and harmony – a particular way of discovering beauty in a geometrical problem. According to Botta, the importance of closing the architectural space stems from references to the permanent and “ideal” values rooted in the historical past of architecture together with their creation by way of archetypal meanings. Monumentality of these solutions may inspire emotions in Botta’s single-family houses: in Viganello (1980–1981), in Morbio Superiore (1982–1984) and in multi-family ones: in Sesto San Giovanni (2006–2009) near Monza and the Cruquis complex (2008) in the Dutch Haarlem. However, Botta’s consistent feeling that the idea contained in a building can withstand cultural and civilizational changes seems to be the essence of the pursuit of timeless meanings. One can discover the significance of this ideation, which combined and integrated an “expressive” formula and formal ideality approximating the definition of a contemporary monument in Botta’s most significant reference – to the idea of Louis Kahn’s pre-form. According to Louis Kahn, ideality of formal system should include harmony, a sense of order and that, which characterises the existence of one in relation to the other – the whole to the part. This formal-geometric ideality possesses neither shape nor size – it has the simplest pattern, which is simultaneously the most “capacious” in the resource of basic meanings, metaphors and symbols. Conservatism referring to the timeless values of architecture within certain fixed tangible meanings and Mannerist geometric simplicity of form may become a way to seek timelessness. The formal ideality of the monumental academic complex in Ahmedabad or in La Jolla conceals identical forms for various academic functions: administration, lecture halls and students’ flats. Through periodicity of stylistic formula, the dormitories of the Indian Institute of Management (1962–1974) and the Salt Institute (1959–1965) constitute a fragment of the same monumental whole. In both implementations, creating the square’s frame with the use of the residential front-ages sets the most important formula of the square and campus’s space by the proper use of scale, context and symmetry of the whole complex.

Two other examples – semi-detached houses in Montesiro (1982) and a housing complex for the elderly in Galliate Novara (1982) designed by Antonio Monestiroli, provide an opportunity to recall neo-rational motivations of monumental architecture. National in both form and content, Monestiroli’s favourite creative work of Heinrich Tessenow (boarding school in Klotsche, 1925) becomes a direct reason for the pursuit of the harmony of sublimity within the impeccable style of the small complex. The system of porticos directed to the inside of the complex employed in Galliate can be associated with the well-judged perfection of a Renaissance forum in which there is no room to add or remove anything. The facilities for the elderly have to reflect the idea of spatial order accomplished due to the order of the orthogonal forms, the symmetry of the arcade and the regularity of the openings in the residential pavilions. The brick buildings with the colonnade accentuated with white plaster situated along the rectangular courtyard-garden constitute Monestiroli’s reference to the contemporary term of a space, which is friendly, but marked with a monumental reception.

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